Boutique words for the culturally savvy: The common Japanese loanwords in American English

Frank Daulton

Abstract

Japanese loanwords in English are not well researched and pose an enigma: why is Japanese considered a major source of loanwords with so few used so narrowly? This paper examines the most common Japanese loanwords in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), revealing how they fill lexical gaps often intrinsically related to Japan and therefore of limited daily use. Japanese loanwords cluster in areas highly relevant to certain "sophisticated" individuals, and Japan's distinct and appealing cultural offerings make it a key source of LW's nonessential to daily life but significant nonetheless. Sushi was found to be the most frequent Japanese loanword, occurring 1023 times in the COCA. Most of the top-10 LWs fit easily into five Japan-related categories: unique food and drink (sushi); cultural artifacts (kimono, rickshaw, futon), recent cultural imports (karaoke), past cultural icons (ninja, geisha), and martial arts (judo, sumo). Among the top-10 loanwords, only tycoon has a usage in modern English independent of its Japanese, historical origin. A top-30 list of loanwords occurring 25 times or more in the COCA is presented.

Keywords

gairaigo, loanword, borrowed word, Japanese, vocabulary

Introduction

A *loanword* (LW) is a word borrowed and incorporated into a recipient language in a process known as *language borrowing* (see Ringbom, 1987). LWs typically fill lexical gaps following an encounter with a foreign culture. Most LWs refer to technology (e.g., engine) or are names for new artifacts (e.g., taxi), rather than basic vocabulary (e.g., eat, moon) or function words (e.g., the). They can retain a strong foreign connotation, or be used without regard to origin. It is common for LWs to undergo various adaptations, and they are not necessarily used as in their donor language. Over time, LWs achieve various levels of acceptance and frequency of use.

A prime example of lexical borrowing is Japan's adopting of European words, particularly from American English; such LWs are known as *gairaigo* ('words from abroad'). Japanese contact with English began more than two centuries ago, and contact with other European languages goes back 500 years (with heavy lexical borrowing from China preceding that). Tens of thousands of English words have been borrowed, most since World War ll, and many are integral parts of daily Japanese, accounting for nearly 10 percent of the lexicon (see Daulton, 2008). Many *gairaigo* are integral to daily life, including some of babies' first words (e.g., *mama* and *bai-bai*). In addition to Japan's desire for Westernization, the factors encouraging LWs include: a great tolerance for even adhoc and redundant LWs; their semantic and grammatical malleability; a dedicated script (*katakana*); and a high turnover (Daulton, 2010).

The path of LWs can be convoluted. Many English words in Korean (known as *Oi-rae-eo*) have arrived via Japanese *gairaigo* (e.g., Kang, Kenstowicz & Ito, 2008). Moreover, a word can return from the recipient language back to the donor in a different form, a process called *reborrowing*; an example is Japanese *anime*, originating from English animation, which has been returned to English with the meaning of "*Japanese* animation."

Japanese-based Loanwords in English

Japanese-based loanwords in English are not as well researched, although Japanese is considered a major donor language, and words such as sushi, kimono and karaoke are so familiar as to not require italics. (This paper will present all Japanese-based English LWs without italicization to distinguish them from their Japanese counterparts e.g., *sushi*.)

The borrowing of Japanese into English began in the 19th century. Commodore Perry returned from feudal Japan with words such as tycoon (*taikun*), a title for the hereditary commander-in-chief (shogun), who was frightened to death by Perry's arrival (Wiley, 1992). Eventually Japan became a major source of words. Evans (1997) refers to Japanese as English's second biggest donor, McArthur (1998) states it has contributed the highest number of new vocabulary of any non-European language, and Cannon and Engle (2009) assert only French and Latin exceed Japanese. Hikikomori (a youth who avoids social contact) and sudoku (a number puzzle) are among the newest Japanese LWs.

Today most English speakers have at least a passing understanding of common Japanese LWs, including an awareness of their East Asian origin. For instance, many children

are aware that the ninja in *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* refers to a mysterious Asian warrior. Meanwhile, for certain subcultures, LWs such as anime and cosplay (costume + play) are highly salient and irreplaceable.

The innovative use of Japanese in English, and Japan's penchant for borrowing English words, have led to the reborrowing of words such as kamikaze. This word is disappearing from everyday Japanese, where it is confined to historical reference. However, expressions such as "*kamikaze doraibā*" ('kamikaze driver'), inspired by English, are increasingly common (Otake, 2010).

Loanword transformations – Japanese to English

The changes that occur to English words when becoming Japanese LWs (see Daulton, 2008) apply when Japanese words enter English, albeit with variations. It is possible to classify the adaptations to *borrowed words* (BWs)–the original, source words–into six types.

1) Pronunciation: Even when the English and romanized Japanese orthographies coincide, e.g., sake and *sake*, pronunciations diverge. A common change to Japanese BWs is to replace final /i/ sounds with /eɪ/. This particular adaptation is reflected in the older English spelling "sacky." Sophisticated speakers may mimic Japanese pronunciation, however this can sound pretentious or incomprehensible. And while most Japanese sounds exist in English, a notable exception is the initial "tsu" of tsunami, which is usually pronounced without the "t."

Meanwhile a fast, informal Japanese pronunciation has become the standard of certain Japanese LWs. For example, during the American Occupation, *sukoshi* came into American English as "a skosh" since the final /i/ is almost silent in casual Japanese. Moreover most Japanese LWs are given penultimate accent; therefore, Hiroshima is pronounced "HiroSHIma," unlike the Japanese pronunciation of "HiROshima."

2) Truncation: The reborrowed Japanese LWs *anime*, *cosplay* and *karaoke* all come from shortened English words (animation; costume + play; Japanese 'without' + orchestra). There are fewer cases of shortened, native Japanese words in English, such as rickshaw from *jinrikisha*. Shogun is another example, as the full title was *seii-taishōgun* ('barbarian subduing generalissimo').

3) Collocating: Affixes can be added to BWs to create innovative hybrids, or *loan-blends*, such as English moxibustion from Japanese *mogusa*, but this is not nearly as common in

English as with English-based LWs in Japanese (e.g., *mikuro-keizai* (microeconomics).

A more common phenomenon involves adding (whole) English words to Japanese ones to create new collocations. Often these collocations clarify meaning in a way that is redundant in Japanese. Examples include "geisha girl," "sumo wrestling," "soy sauce," and "head honcho." And other collocations are simply uncommon in Japanese, such as karaoke in English often appearing with machine, bar, night and party.

4) *Semantic restriction*: An LW's meaning can be narrower than the BW's. Examples include anime, which only means Japanese animation in English but is far more general in Japanese. The same is true of Japanese LWs like manga (any kind of comics), katsu (any kind of cutlet, not just Japanese-style *tonkatsu*), otaku (any kind of obsessive geek or nerd, not just an anime freak) and bento (*bentou* – any kind of packed lunch, including sandwiches). By comparison, semantic restriction of English LWs in Japanese is less common, perhaps because of the extent of Westernization.

A subcategory of semantic restriction is words only used in English to talk about martial arts, but having a more general meaning in Japanese, e.g., sensei (a general term of respect in Japan used for teachers and experts) and sempai (anyone in a senior but similar position). Moreover, sake can mean alcohol in general in Japanese, *nihon-shu* ("Japanese spirits") being the unambiguous way of referring to Japanese rice wine.

5) *Semantic extension*: Conversely, an LW's meaning can be broader than the BW's, as when *kamikaze*–a suicide pilot–is used figuratively in "kamikaze driver" (see above). It can also be seen in how geisha has lost its focus on the artistically trained *geisha* and acquired a broader connotation of prostitution (Otake, 2010).

6) *Semantic shift*: LWs and BWs can be semantically dissimilar, as when the LW describes something absent in the source country. For example, there are no "futon sofas" (nor 'futon beds' or 'futon sofa-beds') made of wooden slats in Japan, as a *futon* is simply a thin mattress that lies directly on the floor. Meanwhile tycoon comes from *taikun*, which has no connection to business (see above). Similarly place names can become LWs that refer to something that originate there, such as satsuma, which refers to what is called *mikan* in Japanese.

A variety of semantic shift is grammatical change. For instance, although *karaoke* is a Japanese noun, some Americans say, "I was karaoke-ing." Similarly many Japanese LWs take the plural –s although plural inflection, per se, does not exist in Japanese. Sophisticated or

pretentious English speakers prefer the more Japanese-like, uninflected plural form, and both geisha and geishas are acceptable (Otake, 2010).

7) Obscure words: Sometimes LWs originate from rather arcane Japanese words; this phenomenon is relatively common with Japanese in English. Just as *taikun*, the origin of tycoon, is obscure in Japan, so is *Shintou*, in contrast to how its LW equivalent Shinto is often used by Westerners discussing Japan. The Japanese rarely discuss religions, per se, and might not think of the local shrine (*jinja*) as part of a broader religious organization.

Japanese-based LWs in English as seen in dictionaries

It is typically copywriters, journalists, translators and academics that borrow foreign words, and the most powerful tool for spreading a word is repetition in the mass media (see Daulton, 2004). Most neologisms stall in obscurity, and only a few reach the mainstream.

Dictionaries can reveal when and how LWs came to be used. Otake (2010) found that tsunami and geisha have been recognized English words since at least 1964; meanwhile otaku, anime and edamame are recent and as they are not included in all dictionaries, presumably less established. However, Otake's data belie that LW integration is a matter of degrees along a continuum, which can be summarized as: adhoc (e.g., advertising text); established (e.g., found in dictionaries); and intrinsic to daily life (see Daulton, 2008).

The status of LWs is changeable and often elusive. For instance "heartful," a plausible English word of Japanese coinage, actually appears over 1000 times in the Corpus of Contemporary American English, but only once in the British National Corpus (Gardner, 2013).

Japanese LWs in English cluster in certain cultural areas non-essential in daily life. Cannon (1994) typifies them as: "… Swords or daggers, food or drink, martial arts, business and currency." In short, although there are numerous Japanese LWs, they tend to be specialized and obscure.

Study – The most common Japanese LWs in American English

Research questions

As the borrowing of Japanese words into English is not well researched, the following research questions were addressed:

1. What are the most common Japanese LWs in American English?
2. How frequently are they used?
3. What are the distinctive patterns of their use?

Procedure

The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) was utilized to determine the most common Japanese-based LWs in American English. The COCA is the largest freely available corpus of American English, with more than 450 million words collected since 1990. Especially as it is equally divided among spoken language, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, and academic texts, the COCA is well suited for examining ongoing changes in English (see Davies, 2011a).

A frequency list of COCA words appearing at least four times in the corpus, a subset of around 500,000 items (see Davies, 2011b), was visually and electronically scanned for Japanese LWs, focusing on the most frequently occurring.

Results

Sushi is the most frequent Japanese LW in the COCA, occurring 1023 times. The following top-10 list was derived. See the appendix for a top-30 list of LWs occurring 25 times or more in the corpus.

Table 1. The top 10 Japanese loanwords in U.S. English (COCA)

Rank in COCA	Romanized Japanese form	English orthography	Occurrences in corpus
1	*sushi*	sushi	1023
2	*kimono*	kimono	629
3	*karaoke*	karaoke	615
4	*taikun*	tycoon	581
5	*ninja*	ninja	496
6	*geisha*	geisha	364
7	*judo*	judo	282
8	*jinrikisha*	rickshaw	235
9	*futon*	futon	219
10	*sumō*	sumo	186

Following sushi, the LWs kimono, karaoke, tycoon, and ninja are much less frequent, and after this cluster, frequency again plunges. While Otake (2010) found tsunami to be the most recognized Japanese LW among English native speakers (p. 23), and Inoue (2012) found it to be the most used Japanese noun on the Internet (p. 37), the COCA showed it to be the 24th most used in American English (see appendix).

Analysis

The COCA indicates that Japanese LWs play a peripheral role in English. Even sushi averaged only one occurrence in 440,000 running words. Meanwhile, the 29th and 30th most common LWs (haiku and ramen) occurred a mere 25 times in the 450-million word corpus. It follows that although the highlighted LWs borrowed from Japanese are somewhat familiar to most Americans, they are not part of daily life nor necessarily well understood. For instance, sushi is commonly mistaken to denote raw fish only.

Indeed the COCA {as well as the New General Service List (NGSL; see Browne,

2013)} indicates that all Japanese LWs in English are *low-frequency words*, i.e., not among the top 3000 word families of English (see Nation, 2001). By contrast, roughly half of the high-frequency word families of English (e.g., the inflection ability from the able word family) correspond to common *gairaigo* LWs (e.g., *abiritii*) in Japanese (Daulton, 2008). That is, while English LWs in Japanese are essential to daily life, Japanese LWs in English are decidedly not.

However, it is not in daily life that Japanese borrowings find their foothold, but in particular semantic fields relevant to certain Americans. As is typical with LWs in general, Japanese-based LWs are nouns filling lexical gaps. Table 2 shows how most of the top-10 LWs fit easily into five Japan-related categories.

Table 2. Top-10 Japanese loanwords and Japan-related specific fields

Loanwords	Japan-specific semantic fields
sushi	Unique food and drink
kimono, rickshaw, futon	Cultural artifacts
karaoke	Recent cultural imports
ninja, geisha	Past cultural icons
judo, sumo	Martial arts

Only tycoon (4th) has a usage in modern English independent of its Japanese historical origin. Likewise, among the top-30 LWs, only typhoon (17th) and tsunami (23rd) describe phenomena whose Asian lexical source is both irrelevant and often unknown. A second characteristic, therefore, of Japanese LWs is to denote uniquely Japanese cultural items. And since the LWs ultimately relate back to Japan, the users tend to be those knowledgeable about foreign-sourced popular culture, possibly as disseminated by the mass media in trendy, urban centers.

Similarly rickshaw (8th) might be transitioning to a more universal usage as the popularity of so-called vehicles grows. While the literal human-powered *jinrikisha* is still extant in Japan, "cycle rickshaws" (also 'pedicabs') and "auto rickshaws" can be seen in other countries. Americans are perhaps losing awareness of rickshaw's Japanese origin, and it may join those

LWs no longer evoking Japan. Although the meanings of other Japanese LWs have diverged (i.e., expanded, contracted or shifted) from the original BWs, most of the common LWs (e.g., sushi, karaoke and sumo) are used in English in more or less the same way as in Japanese.

Among the most frequent LWs, we see great formal similarity between the English spellings (e.g., sushi, kimono) and the Hepburn romanizations (e.g., *sushi*, *kimono*). Among the top-30 LWs, as many as 18 have identical spellings, and a further 9 differ only in the Japanese "long vowel" (e.g., tofu and *tōfu*), which is ignored in English.

However, as with English LWs in Japanese (see Irwin, 2011), deviant transcriptions can indicate a LW's genesis and age. Within the top-10 LWs, tycoon (*taikoon*) and rickshaw (*jinrikisha*) are among the oldest LWs in English. And among the top-30 LWs, the few variant spellings likewise relate to the initial borrowing being historically early (e.g., honcho; 1940s) and likely based on a misapprehended aural encounter (e.g., of *hanchō*). This conversely points to most recent borrowings being based on a romanized, written encounter rather than an aural one, although subsequent pronunciations can differ subtly (e.g., manga from *manga*) or radically (e.g., karaoke from *karaoke*).

Among the top-30 Japanese LWs are tycoon (4th) and shogun (26th), the former used in the business world, and the latter limited to historical reference. In Japan, both *taikoon* and *shōgun* are archaic and rarely used except in history books. Moreover, *taikoon*, *tōfu* (tofu) and *rāmen* (ramen) are actually Japanese adaptations of Chinese expressions.

Among Japanese LWs appearing very infrequently in the COCA are items like zenkoku, meaning "all of a country." However, many such items may not qualify as LWs, per se, and should be understood as adhoc, nonce borrowings; in this case, zenkoku had likely appeared in the Japanese name of a facility or event.

Conclusion

Although Japanese is considered a major source of loanwords for English, the COCA shows Japanese LWs to be relatively scarce, especially compared to English LWs in Japanese. Because none are high frequency, the COCA supports the observation that Japanese LWs play a limited lexical role, and are not often used in daily life.

Thus Japanese LWs in English pose an enigma. Although the borrowing process follows orthodox patterns that include changes in pronunciation, form and meaning, Japanese

LWs are few and specialized, typically filling lexical gaps intrinsically related to Japan and therefore of limited use in America. Notwithstanding, Japanese LWs cluster in culturally prominent areas that are highly relevant to certain "sophisticated" individuals, for instance, otaku fans of Japanese anime; one might conclude that American youth identify with no foreign culture more than Japanese popular culture.

Thus we can perhaps best understand Japanese-based LWs in English as *boutique words for the culturally savvy*. Even so, Japan's distinct and appealing cultural offerings–Cannon's (1994) "swords or daggers"–make Japanese a key source of LW's arguably irrelevant to daily life but significant nonetheless. For the whimsical, how such a small number of words wields such an impact parallels the influence of Japan itself on the modern world.

Limitations

This study focused on the most common Japanese-based loanwords. Beneath the threshold of 25 occurrences in 450 million English words, are many complementary, highly specialized borrowings, which may not constitute fully-fledged LWs. For instance, in karate, there are many Japanese words (e.g., *kiai* = 'spirit yell'), expressions (e.g., *jiyū kumite* = freestyle sparring) and commands (e.g., '*otagai ni taishi*' = 'face each other'). We can infer that the pyramidal hierarchy of Japanese LWs has a particularly broad and opaque base. An examination of these more auxiliary borrowings could be revealing.

The COCA itself presents certain obstacles. For instance, although Japanese sake is a well-known LW, since it shares orthography with an unrelated word, it was not practical to extract data on its frequency. That is, probably very few of the around 60,000 occurrences of the word "sake" in the COCA refer to Japanese rice wine. However, a collocation search for sake and drink found 56 occurrences, confirming that sake should be at least among the top-30 LWs.

Another reason for Japanese being a leading source of LWs may be modern English's disdain of lexical borrowing. That is, Japanese LWs may have little competition from other LWs in recent times. However, verifying such a theory was beyond the scope of this paper.

Loanwords enrich the borrowing languages and are an important facet of global language evolution. Moreover awareness of language borrowing and potential cognate relationships is highly relevant to foreign language teaching.

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Appendix

The top-30 Japanese loanwords in U.S. English (based on the COCA)

Rank in COCA	Romanized Japanese form	English orthography	Occurrences in corpus
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8	*jinrikisha*	rickshaw	235
9	*futon*	futon	219
10	*sumō*	sumo	186
11	*teriyaki*	teriyaki	168
12	*origami*	origami	164
13	*hanchō*	honcho	163
14	*koi*	koi	142
15	*sensei*	sensei	109
16	*anime*	anime	94
17	*taifū*	typhoon	91
18	*tempura*	tempura	86
19	*tōfu*	tofu	85
20	*karate*	karate	75
21	*aikidō*	aikido	70

22	*zen*	zen	63
23	*jujitsu*	jujitsu	62
23	*tsunami*	tsunami	62
25	*dōjō*	dojo	59
26	*shōgun*	shogun	55
27	*manga*	manga	47
28	*sayōnara*	sayonara	47
29	*haiku*	haiku	25
30	*rāmen*	ramen	25

Author Bio

Frank E. Daulton is a Professor at Ryukoku University in Kyoto. He first came to Japan on the JET Program in 1989. His interests include language transfer, lexis and collocations. He completed his doctorate under Paul Nation and is the author of *Japan's Built-in Lexicon of English* (2008, Multilingual Matters).